2318 A New Paradigm  
  
Trying to defend the Ash Castle was a losing strategy.  
  
They could potentially deal with the three Snow Beasts, but that would take time. And in that time, more powerful figures would most likely reach the Ash Castle, leading to a checkmate.  
  
Sunny had grown used to dealing with problems by using overwhelming strength as of late. But here in Ariel's game, he was once again weak - he did not have his shades, his Shadows, his Memories. He did not even have a single shadow to augment himself.  
  
If a couple of Demons of a high enough Rank shоwed up, surrounded by Monsters and Beasts, his end would be swift and inevitable. In order to survive, Sunny had to act with cunning and foresight.  
  
He narrowed his eyes and asked Kai calmly:  
  
'So, what should we do?'  
  
Kai shrugged.  
  
'The same thing Ki Song did at Greater Crossing, I guess. Abandon the fortified position and attack instead, aiming to crush the adversary forces while they are isolated from each other.' He glanced at Sunny with curiosity and asked:  
  
'Am I correct?'  
  
Sunny remained silent for a few seconds. 'You are not exactly wrong, but you are also not exactly right either.' He sighed and pointed to where Slayer's arrow was sticking from the ash. 'Slayer seems to understand the essence of this conflict better. You see, Kai, your answer is based on sound military paradigm, but it is an obsolete military paradigm - one formed by thousands of years of war and conflict in the waking world. The reality of our world has changed, though… but our thinking has not been quick enough to adapt.' He pointed to the grid. 'I hear that chess is a game that is supposed to represent a military conflict - a mundane military conflict. Death Game, however, is a game that represents a supernatural military conflict, one where Demons and Devils play the role of soldiers. And naturally, there is a Tyrant.'  
  
This time, Sunny pointed to himself. 'In a mundane war, destroying the adversary army is a primary goal - after all, it is tantamount to victory. But in a world infected by the Nightmare Spell, an individual can possess greater power than an army. The army is merely a tool that the Tyrant uses. It exists for convenience. Therefore, the primary goal is to destroy the Tyrant.'  
  
Sunny glanced at the runes describing the three Snow Beasts. 'In other words, your very premise is wrong - because you see the act of destrоying the adversary forces as inherently valuable. But in fact, it is not. It is only valuable if killing them brings us closer to slaying the Snow Tyrant, and if it doesn't, then there's no point in fighting with them at all.' He smiled. 'Which is not to say that killing them is entirely useless. It's just… of minor importance. Or it would have been, if not for one detail - a detail that makes killing these Beasts actually detrimental to us.'  
  
Kai raised an eyebrow. 'I can somewhat follow your logic in that fighting the Snow Abominations might not have any value for our current situation. But… detrimental? Surely, removing them from the board will at least give us more breathing room. Plus, no matter how powerful the Snow Tyrant is, the Snow Tyrant surrounded by the Snow Army would still be more powerful.'  
  
Sunny nodded. 'Sure. But you are forgetting the initial point Slayer made.'  
  
He gestured to the rune the silent Shadow had drawn in the ash. 'Sacrifice. There is actually a way to kill the Snow Abominations that will make us stronger. Because of that, killing them in any other way will actually be no different from depriving ourselves of power - power we desperately need to kill the Snow Tyrant.'  
  
Next, he pointed to the squares on the edges of the grid where the Shrines usually stood. One was defended by several Snow figures, while the other one was empty. 'Killing our enemies at first opportunity holds close to no value. In fact, it holds negative value. Just because we can slay them does not mean we should… unless we slay them in one of these Shrines. Do you understand now?'  
  
Kai remained silent for a long time, thinking.  
  
Eventually, he asked in a subdued tone:  
  
'Are you sure you're nоt a great chess player, Sunny?'  
  
Sunny scoffed.  
  
'What are you talking about? This has nothing to do with chess. It's just common logic.'  
  
Kai gave him a dubious look.  
  
'I wouldn't call such logic common, though.'  
  
Then, he turned and glanced at Slayer with curiosity. 'It is also impressive that your… employee… was able to not only fathom the essence of this game, but also explain it by writing a single rune аnd plunging her arrow into the ash. She is quite eloquent.'  
  
Sunny could not help but laugh. Actually, he almost toppled over from laughter.  
  
'Oh? Do you admire her now? I see you have a type… my employees,' He grinned. 'Be careful, though. This one is a real heartbrеaker. Actually, that's how we met.'  
  
Kai looked at him in confusion.  
  
'She… broke your heart?'  
  
Sunny nodded energetically.  
  
'Exactly! Well, to be precise, she put an arrow through my heart. Hurt like hell.'  
  
Turning to Slayer, Sunny smiled pleasantly.  
  
'But don't worry. The next time we met, we tussled inside a dead god… who was walking around inside the corpse of another, greater dead god… and when the dead god crumbled, I returned the favor. By killing her. Oh, and after I killed her, we fought for about another year, this time inside my own soul. I even died myself in the meantime. Quite a rigorous selection process, as you can see! But how else can one find good employees?'  
  
Kai stared at him blankly.  
  
Meeting his hollow gaze, Sunny raised an eyebrow.  
  
'What? Do you use a different recruitment method for the Nightsingers?'  
  
Kai closed his eyes for a moment and asked, his voice devoid of all emotions:  
  
'Sunny, can I ask you something?'  
  
Sunny blinked a couple of times.  
  
'Sure. You can.'  
  
Kai inhaled deeply.  
  
'Do you possibly suffer from some kind of mental illness?'  
  
Sunny frowned.  
  
'What? Of course not.'  
  
When Kai exhaled slowly, he added with a smile:  
  
'Suffering from mental illnesses? How trite. If anything, mental illnesses suffer from me…'  
  
Kai's eyes trembled.